

# An Interview with Janet Swenson



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## Coming to BYU

I came to BYU as a student first in 1965, the year after the Fine Arts Building was finished, so I was there when the building was new. Everything's old now, including me! I got my bachelor's from BYU in 1969 and my master's degree in 1971 and then I went to the rival school in 1991 and got my third degree of glory, my MFA.

It wasn't very unusual the way I came to BYU. All of the Mormon students up in Seattle, Washington, where I'm from, wanted to come to BYU to go to an LDS College, and so we applied. Now the GPA requirement is so high I couldn't get into BYU anymore. I only had a 3.7 and now I think the kids have to have 3.8 or 3.9, don't they? I don't know how much, but it has to be big. I think I was lucky to be teaching there, because I couldn't be a student anymore.

## Teaching at BYU

I've always taught design and technology. When I first started teaching, however, I taught voice diction and interpretation as one of the classes, and so I did a lot of teaching of actors and speaking voices and that kind of thing. Then I got hired on a fluke, I think. I mean, I think Heavenly Father put me here to teach at BYU, but I wasn't really qualified when I started. I only had an MA, and that was in theatre history. So, to get hired to be a costume designer and a makeup teacher was pretty unusual. But the woman who had taught there for thirteen years before—you know she was my faculty mentor too—Beverly Jean Warner was her name, and just one day out of the blue after we'd been working together for three years (I was a student and she as my teacher) she just said, "I've been waiting for the right person to come to take my place, and you're it and I'm quitting."

I understood why she wanted to. In those days, boy, we worked hard. We did three Pardoe shows, and two Margetts shows, and an opera in the fall, and the same thing in the winter term. Then we did one opera, a Pardoe show, and a Margetts show in the spring. Then usually in the summer we'd do what they called at that time the BYU Repertory Company, and we'd put up three musicals at the same time, and the same cast would be in all three, and it'd play for the rest of the summer. So we were always working hard; there was always a show going on.

I think probably the best part [of teaching at BYU] is collaboration in all areas, including the gospel. I just love the fact that we could always bring our church into our work at school. We'd start meetings with prayers and things like that, you know? There was always a—well this sounds kinds of odd—but there was always that Mickey Rooney, "I got a barn, let's do a show" kind of an attitude. Everybody was always helping everybody else. It was very fun.

One funny story that I thought of last night: we were doing *Royal Hunt of the Sun*, which is a story of Pizarro conquering the Incas, and there were forty people playing Incas in the show, and each one had to have a feather cape. We made the feather capes by putting mosquito netting on a costume rack, and I outlined the cape shape, and then did kind of a paint by number thing of all the different colors of feathers we wanted on there. Then I just laid feathers under the rack with a thing of glue, and put signs up all over the Fine Arts Building saying, "Come down and poke feathers, we really need some help." So they'd come down, they'd squirt a little glue on the feather and they'd stick it in the mosquito netting, and we'd get capes done. Well, one weekend, I set up the last eight capes. We had the first dress rehearsal on Wednesday, and there were eight capes not finished—I never was not done on first dress rehearsal, you know? That was always our goal: to be finished. So I set them up, I put more signs everywhere, and I talked to all my students and said, "Tell them to come down." Well, Sunday morning, I had church in the Fine Arts Building. I never got out of there; my church was in the Nelke Theatre. Anyway, I dropped my coat and my purse off in the costume shop on the way to sacrament meeting, and I went to

sacrament meeting and Sunday school and everything. And I went back in the costume shop to pick up my stuff, and instead of going out the front door, I went out the back door to head to the elevator, and that's where all the racks are set up. When I got there in the morning, those eight capes were not even started, when I left church, I went out the back door, and they were finished! I thought this is just like the little shoemaker, you know? Those little elves just came and finished those capes. I was telling the miracle story to the crew the next day on Monday, and one of the girls started laughing. She said, "Well, that was my ward. Our relief society teacher didn't show up, so I said, 'I've got a lesson. We could do a service project!'" She brought them all down and they finished our capes. It was awesome. I love stuff like that. There's always that kind of collaborative spirit that we had that I loved.

I think my favorite part of teaching is, first, of having all the kids be there with me when I'm doing a project and they watch and they learn. They're like little birdies sitting on your shoulder, you know? Then watching them grow enough that you can just say, "Fly little birdie," and they just succeed. I'm always astounded by the quality of the students at BYU, and their abilities to do what they need to do. They're fearless, which is wonderful. I think they don't understand that they could fail, and because they don't think they can, they don't fail. They're just fabulous. I just love watching them. I love being around them.

## **Contributions to BYU**

One of my contributions for TMA was the development of the Rank and Status Document, the new one that we did. We hadn't had a lot of success getting our faculty members advanced in rank; in fact, at one point, we didn't have one single full professor. The highest we had was an associate. Most everyone was either an assistant professor or even an instructor. It was really frustrating, because your artistic efforts are compared with people who write and the people who talk about doing things rather than doing them, and they don't understand how difficult it is. I had one person on a college ranking status committee one time tell me that I'd never be advanced in rank unless I designed a Broadway show. I thought, "You know, that's like you getting the Pulitzer Prize for writing. Hello. That's almost impossible." But they just didn't get it. So, I worked for two and a half years. I had some help from several people in the film area and from Elizabeth Funk, and everybody pitched in, and we wrote a new document, and we haven't had anyone rejected since. They follow those rules. I think, probably, at BYU, that was the biggest thing [I contributed].

I'm also very proud of the costume designs that I did for *The Light of the World*, which was the church's production for the Winter Olympics in 2002. We had over 10,000 costume pieces that I had to inventory and design and everything. That was the other fun part: that all of my students and some former students were involved with it, and they just took charge of certain areas, and we all did it together—under Randy Boothe, who's director of the Young Ambassadors—for two years. I remember one morning my mother told me that I should just move into the Fine Arts Building, because I was there so much when we were working on that show.

The last thing I did every night was get on my computer and update all of the costume plots and stuff. I remember waking up about 3 o'clock one morning and I was sitting at my desk—this would be a lot better if it had Z's—and I had three pages of C on my computer, because I fell asleep with my finger on the letter C. I just slept sitting straight up, and then finally woke up. It was kind of amusing. It was great.

My philosophy is you surround yourself with brilliance and let people rule themselves, and they make you look brilliant, you know? I'm just kind of average, but I surrounded myself with really good people, and that always makes the project better.

### **BYU Repertory Company**

One of the things that we used to do that they don't do anymore is the touring company that they used to have. The students do a tour now, but they just do a children's show, and usually they go out and they do one show a day. We had a BYU Repertory Company that would go out and we'd go on tour for two or three weeks at a time, on a bus. There were sixteen in the cast, and they'd divide the cast in half and have eight in each half, and we'd go to elementary schools in the morning. The most shows we ever did in one morning was ten, five for each group. Then we'd go to the high schools in the afternoon, and they'd feed us lunch and we'd do a Shakespeare. It was always shortened; it was usually about an hour long, because anymore than an hour of Shakespeare and kids are climbing the walls. We'd do *Hamlet* or *Taming of the Shrew*, and then we'd go over to the church at night, and the relief society would feed us and we'd do a religious drama, like *Korihor the Anti-Christ*, that were original plays that were written and accepted in playwriting contests. We'd just do that everyday for weeks and then come back home. I had one of my friends say, "What happened to you? You've always been so active in theatre, and you haven't been in anything or you haven't designed anything"—cause I ended up designing a lot of the costumes for those—"I haven't seen your name for a year." And I went, "I bet I did more shows last week than you've done in your life time." We would just be gone and nobody would know where we were. It was kind of fun.

### **My Fair Lady**

I remember one time we were doing *My Fair Lady*, and it was the morning of the opening night, and I was down in the makeup room getting ready to teach my class, and one of the stage hands from the scene shop came running down. "Have you got any extra people? Something dreadful just happened!" What they had done was that the set was on a rotate, and they hadn't turned it the right way, and they'd dropped scenery on top of it and broke the top half off. And it was opening night, and half the set was lying on the floor. I said, "Okay, how many people do you want?" "As many as you've got." So I went down to the costume shop and I said, "Get out every pair of coveralls, every pair of jeans, every work shirt we've got, and lay it all out in the hall." Then I went to my kids in the makeup room and said, "Go put on some clothes and go help on the set." We sent out notices all over the building, and the music students were coming down and working on it—they just all got in the grubbies we laid out—and they went up and did a corrective makeup on the set. It was pretty funny. They got it all finished. Dr. Metten, he was the department chair, ordered pizza for everybody; that was fun. Then on the opening night, the guy that's playing Henry Higgins is out there, and the first time the set rotates—it was outside and then it rotated to inside—and evidently there was a piece of scenery that was just stuck on the top that nobody saw, and as it rotated into his house, the piece of scenery fell on the floor, and he looked down, he said, "Oh, I really need to speak to Mrs. Pearce about her house keeping." The audience just howled. They didn't know why the piece fell, but we did, and it was pretty fun.

There's always something like that going on that makes it fun. I remember when we first started doing the film area; it was kind of like Adam and Adam's ribs. We took away a few theatre ribs to create the film area, and they brought in Tad Danielewski, who was an academy

award winning director to be the head of the program, and he came in and got us all going on film, and that was fun, I really liked that part.

### **Arsenic and Old Lace**

*Arsenic and Old Lace*? Yeah, we had a great deal of fun. That was fun. I had done *Arsenic and Old Lace* with Gene Jenkins probably twenty years before that, and now I'm finally old enough to play the parts I've been playing my whole life—the funny old lady. Now I'm too old to play them, I'm all rickety. Barta [Heiner] and I had a great time when we did *Arsenic*. We had fun. You know, she's the head of the acting program, she's just a fabulous actress, but she'd get so nervous she'd forget her own name, and she'd call me Abby, and she was Abby. I'd just look at her and go, "Okay, you're Abby, I'm Martha." Right in front of the audience, only I did it in Martha's voice and stuff. I'd just have to correct her and then just shake my head like, "She's senile, she's gone." It was fun. The one thing I love about BYU working in the Theatre Department was that there were so many things to do. When I first started teaching, all I taught was costume design, you know, once I really got rid of the voice diction and everything, and all my professional jobs were in makeup. I worked on that original *Donny and Marie Show*, nobody was born then that goes to BYU now, but anyway, I worked on that and did film. But always makeup never costumes, and then all of a sudden, I started only teaching makeup classes when we got Mary Farahnakian from clothing and textiles, and I moved over and did only makeup classes and all my professional jobs were in costume design.

### **MFA Program**

I thought that was pretty noble of Mary and Rory and me to give up our MFA program, because it was very successful. But when we looked at the department as a whole, there were three of us in costume design, and half a person in Theatre Education, and I think we all thought very strongly that if we don't educate the upcoming generations into the love and the knowledge of theatre, then what we do will dry up and there won't be a need for us anymore. That's when we decided we'd give one of our faculty slots to Theatre Education. That's why I wasn't replaced when I retired.

### **Utah Shakespearian Festival**

I have quite a few memories of Utah Shakespearian Festival. I worked there nineteen seasons, and I designed 27 shows. So there were several seasons when I did two at a time, one season I did three, two in the summer and one in the fall. But my most memorable shows there, I think, were my first one and my last one. The first one—this is how stupid I am—I was working on *Julius Caesar* at BYU, and they hadn't given me a script—a lot of times people forget that you need a script—but I had my complete works of Shakespeare in my office, so I went in my office and I looked up *Julius Caesar*. It was on page 1217 or something, so I'm going through the book, looking for *Julius Caesar*, and the play right before it, I called it in my head, *Tim-in of Athens*. *Time-en (Timon) of Athens* is the way you say it. I'd never ever heard of that Shakespeare. So I got stuck and I started reading it. I read a couple pages, and thought, no wonder I've never heard of this, this is really kind of stinky. This is the honest truth—not ten minutes later, my phone rings, and it's Doug Cook calling from the Utah Shakespearian Festival, asking me if I would be interested in designing *Timon of Athens* for them the following summer. That was the first offer I ever got from them. If it had been fifteen minutes before, I would have said, "Yeah, sure, who wrote it?"

Then I got to work with Robert Cohen, who wrote all of the Intro to Theatre Books that we use all the time. He was the director, so I was a little bit intimidated, but he's wonderful to work with. He's become one of my go to directors, so when he's doing a special project, he'll call me, which is nice. Anyway, he said at the end of the first half of the play, Timon—who has always been generous with all his friends, and helped them with all of his money—his ships sink when they're out coming back, so he loses all his money. He goes to the people who owe him money or owe him favors, and asks them for help, and they all turn him down, which is so rude. And so he says, "I leave Athens"—he's just disgusted with them—he says, "I leave Athens with nothing." And Robert said, "And while he's giving this big long speech, he's going to be disrobing. And when he leaves, he leaves literally with nothing." And I went, "No Turkish underwear?" cause he wanted to do it Turkish, and he said, "That's Correct." And I went, "Holy Cow!" They hired this little Mormon girl to come down and do nudity at the Utah Shakespearian Festival, and I'm going, "I'm kind of freaking out!" But I was pretty sure Fred Adams wouldn't go for that, so I designed lots of different levels of Turkish Underwear, from way covered to just barely covered, and then waited to see what would happen. And Fred put the kibosh on it and said, "No, we're not going to do it," so, whew, I didn't have to design nudity—well I didn't design nudity anyway, because I figure Heavenly Father took care of that for me. I didn't have to draw it. Anyway that was my first experience, and it was way fun. I really enjoyed that.

Then my last show that I did there was on a fiftieth anniversary, and they brought Fred out of retirement to direct *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and he asked me to design it. That was a great show to finish my work at the festival on. My nickname's Queen of Glitz, that's why I'm wearing all this sparkly stuff today. Anyway, I got to just use all the glitz I wanted on that particular production, because Fred loves glitz too, so I figure if it sparkles, we're both going to love it. We had great actors playing the parts and it was really fun. And that's the Utah Shakespearian Festival.

## **Legacy at BYU**

I think my most important work at BYU was loving the students. Making sure that if they wanted to do what I did for a living, that they had good preparation, that they had lots of experience, and that they always know, no matter where they are or what they're doing, that they can always get in touch with me and ask me questions and get a little brush up on what they're doing. I've got students all over, literally, the world. At one point, I had one student running the costume shop at Disney Hong Kong, another student running Disney World Costume shop, and the head of the production at Disneyland is a student of mine. In fact the only place I didn't have a student in charge of something at a Disney thing was in France. I just couldn't get anybody to go to France, I don't know what's wrong. Anyway, [all my past students] know that they can always come and see me, and because they had so many opportunities when they were students, they're very generous with my students now also. I'm taking some students down to the international makeup artist trade show in January, and we've already got appointments set up with all kinds of graduates who are now professionals and they're going to do workshops and talk with the kids and answer questions and take them out on movie sets and television sets where they're working so that the upcoming students get to know about it. I think that's my most important thing: the students.